Productivity Is Calling

An analysis of the role of hegemony in constructing workers in call centres.

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Abstract

In New Zealand the call centre industry is receiving strong support from both business and government due to its conception as providing opportunities for information employment. Notorious for their reputation as the "sweatshops" of the new millennium, call centres have received widespread criticism from academics and unions alike due to the nature of their labour controls. Consequently research on call centres has focused on patterns of labour control and in particular the nature of employee surveillance. Two types of research are predominant. The most topical sociological research pertains to the Bentham/Foucault notion of the Panopticon of Surveillance and is highly critical of call centre management. Alternate literature from the field of Human Resource Management exercises a somewhat softer approach and often examines call centres from a business perspective focusing on improving employer/employee relations. This thesis argues that neither perspective provides a solid theoretical base to explain the significance of the social mechanics of call centre labour relations, nor do they explain in any detail how workers are moulded and shaped to meet the needs of employers within the larger framework of the "new economy". Using data from a case study of a call centre, Telecorp Services, this thesis outlines how the concept of hegemony can be effectively applied to the call centre labour process to explain the activities and tactics used by employers to manage productivity. This thesis identifies a number of practices at both the pre-employment and post employment stages that indicate the roles of employees of call centres are constructed within the ideological parameters of the free market. Call centre employers use a variety of methods including profiling, character assessment, motivation management and training to boost productivity and performance. In the process call centre employers expend a great deal of energy attempting to convince workers of the legitimacy of increasing productivity. Despite this they are unable to reconcile tensions within the labour process. The demands of efficiency and service delivery appear to be irreconcilable within an excessive performance culture. This leads staff to adopt various forms of resistance such as unionisation and staff turnover, problems that employers appear to be struggling to find answers for.

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